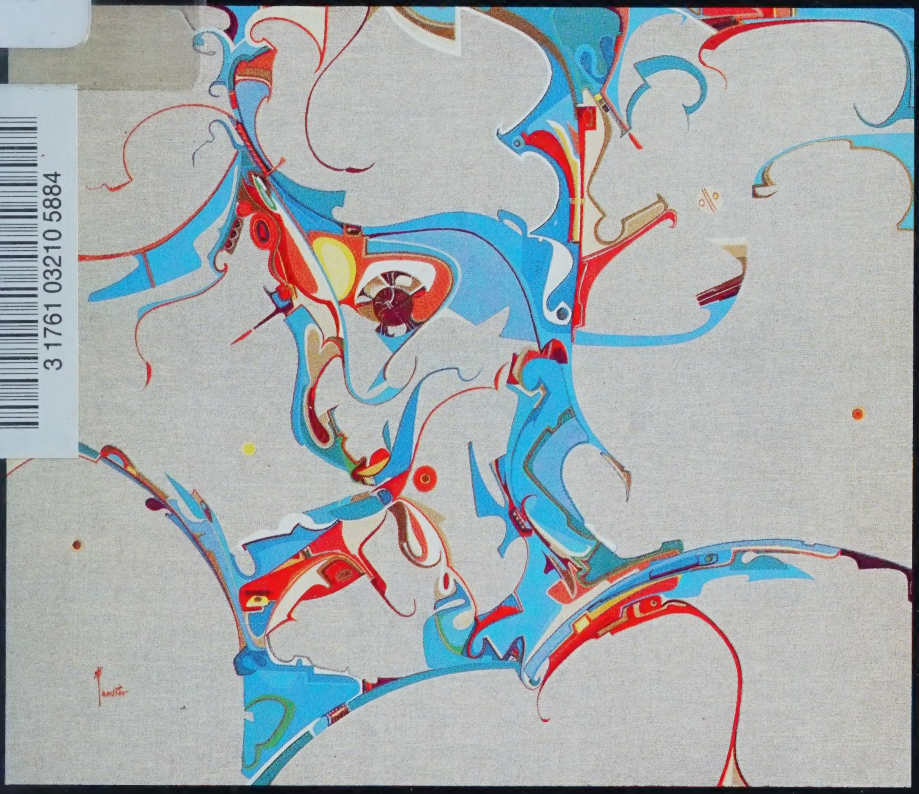
contemporary native art of canada

PAMP
ND
249
J35
A4
1978
ROMU

alex janvier



ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM LIBRARIES
3 1761 03210 5884

ROM

Royal Ontario Museum
Ethnology Department
100 Queen's Park
Toronto, Ontario

January - February 1978

Supporting Agency:
The Department of Indian
and Northern Affairs

ISBN 0-88854-214-3

Front Cover: **Noise Language**
Back Cover: **Swedish Evening**

Exhibit Design Services

ND
249
.J36
A4
1978
PAMP
AR

© 1978 by the Royal Ontario Museum
Not to be reproduced without written permission
Photography by Leighton Warren and Brian Boyle, Photography Department, ROM
Printed in Canada by Tollefson Lithographing Ltd.

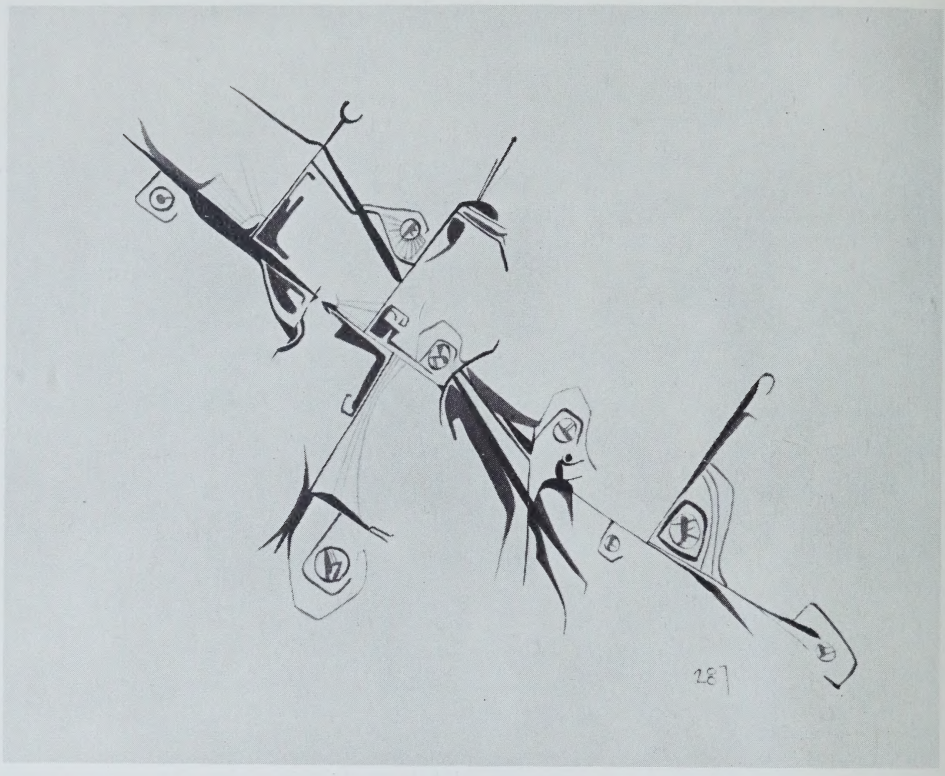
AOE-3949

introduction

One measure of an artist's quality is the individuality of his work; this is often seen through its development and continuity. In the past fifteen years Alex Janvier has emerged as an artist whose strong individual style is matched by the spirited independence of his life.

This exhibition is the work of many hands. Special thanks are due to the artist himself and to the Gallery Moos; to Helen Band, Dr. Bernard Cinader, Robert Houle, Dr. W. E. Taylor, Jr., and Eileen Best; to the National Museum of Man and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Ottawa; and to many members of the staff of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

Alexander Best



1. Untitled watercolour

Alex Janvier was born in 1935 on the Cold Lake Indian Reserve, 180 miles northeast of Edmonton and 90 miles north of Lloydminster, on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. He is a Chipewyan, a tribe which is part of the large Athapaskan group, and he spoke only Chipewyan until at the age of eight he became a pupil at the Blue Quills Indian Boarding School in St. Paul, Alberta. The Cold Lake Reserve had a population of about one thousand that lived by hunting, trapping, and fishing. Janvier's father, who had been hereditary chief, hunted any available game, including deer, moose, and elk, as well as the many species of birds of the region. Wood buffalo roamed the area and caribou occasionally travelled as far south as the Reserve. Janvier says Cold Lake was where the Plains ended and the North began. Some of the Indians ranched on a small scale and grew grain. Today the area is more thickly forested and brush-covered than Janvier remembers from his childhood days on the Reserve.

The Indians normally spoke Chipewyan. They were taught English at school, and until recent years, when bilingualism became fashionable, the local pronunciation of his family name was Jănveer. Janvier says that some families on the Cold Lake Reserve were descendants of French trappers or voyageurs from many generations ago, but that his own name, Alexandre Janvier, came from the French Catholic nuns or priests who originally settled in the area about 1870. These had simply tried to arrive at logical or easily pronounced French names from the complex and difficult Chipewyan tongue. Janvier can remember the sudden shock of cultural change at Blue Quills School, where, along with other Indian children, he was immersed in a totally new environment, administered usually by sheltered, convent-trained

2. Swenglish

nuns from Quebec or the West. He learned English quickly, aided by his childhood training with his father on the Reserve, where every detail and mark in the environment was a clue to the weather, the wildlife, the food supply, and often to survival itself. He applied the sharp, retentive memory developed by this training to mastering the mysterious signs of the English language.

Janvier's years at Blue Quills School were influenced strongly by the Director, Father Étienne Bernet-Rolande, a Parisian priest of wide education who gave steady encouragement and deep understanding to the Indian children. As a child on the Reserve, Janvier remembers drawing on the ground with a pointed stick, but he maintains that many children had at least as much artistic ability as he. At Blue Quills the abundance of pencils and paper provided new opportunities for the young artist. Karl Altenberg, an art teacher from the University of Alberta, visited St. Paul regularly and, through a local art group, encouraged Janvier to expand his artistic horizons and to learn basic draughtsmanship. "They conspired to rush art on me" says Janvier of this stage of his life when, at the age of 14, he was more interested in girls and hockey.

When the Cold Lake Indian children finished public school they returned to the Reserve or obtained jobs with local farmers or ranchers. Janvier's class was the first to enter high school at St. Thomas College, North Battleford. He graduated in 1956 and went to the Alberta College of Art in Calgary, where he completed four years in fine arts in 1960. He feels that he owes these opportunities for education to Father Rolande and that fortune was kind to him.

After graduation from the College of Art,

3. Today Is the First Day

Janvier worked at a variety of jobs and became an activist in the Indian rights movement in the west. Life was not easy. He taught for two years (1961-62) through the extension department of the University of Alberta at Edmonton; after that, he returned to the Cold Lake Reserve, where he painted and helped his brother with ranching. In 1964, the Jacox Gallery in Edmonton held the first show of his work. In 1965-66 he was on contract with the Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, and during Canada's centennial year he helped to organize the Indian Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, for which he painted a large, circular mural.

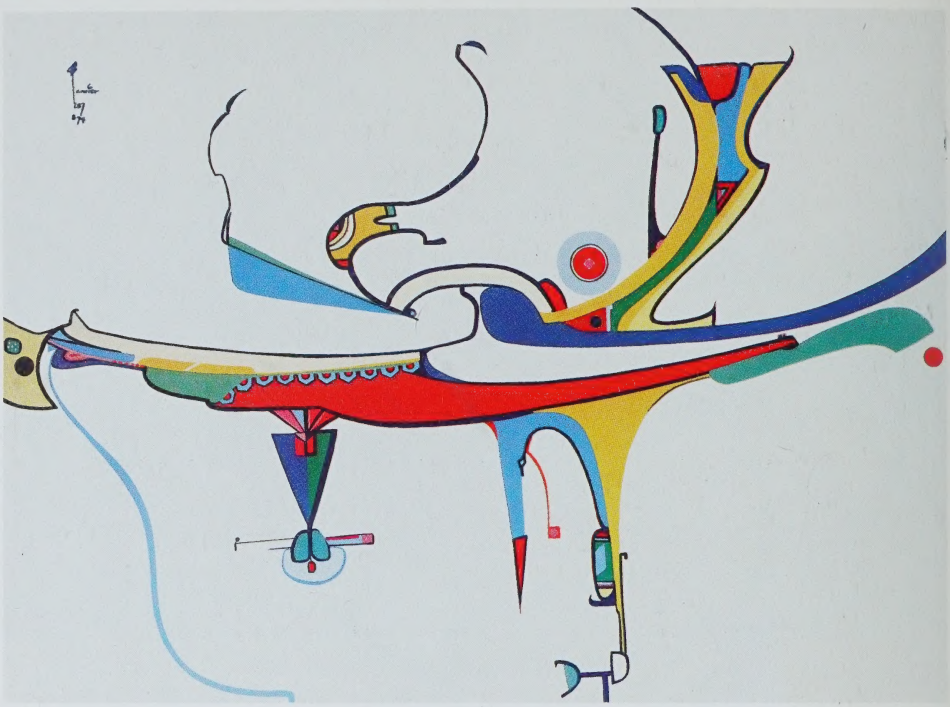
After his work at Expo 67, Janvier returned to Alberta. In 1968 he taught adult classes at Saddle Lake Indian School near St. Paul, Alberta, where he met his future wife, Jacqueline Wolowski, a teacher of Ukrainian-Irish background from Carrot River, Saskatchewan. Together they taught for Alberta Newstart Inc. at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska at the mouth of the Slave River. Here Janvier taught an adult life skills programme until 1970.

During these years of teaching and other work, Janvier still found time to paint, and by 1971 he had decided to commit himself to painting as a full-time occupation. For the next few years the Janviers lived in Sherwood Park, a suburb of Edmonton. Then in the summer of 1977 they moved back to a log cabin and studio on the Cold Lake Reserve, where they now live with their four children. Janvier feels that he benefited from the order, conventionality, and regularity of suburban life at Sherwood Park. It served as a good base while he was developing as an artist and was seeking gallery outlets, exhibitions, and commissions. But he welcomed the return to the more

4. The Troubled Identity

isolated life of the Reserve, where he has the opportunity to live again with nature as in his early years.

Janvier is quiet and unassuming. He talks readily, with a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek humour, and sometimes a slightly sarcastic edge, but he is always thoughtful and to the point. He laughs easily and has developed a mature, philosophical appreciation of people and situations. He can be direct and disarming, with a simplicity derived from deep experience and from roots close to nature, and he has a clear sense of his own identity. Quieter now, after the turmoil of the 1960s, he is more comfortable with recognition and success, yet he patiently searches for even wider communication in his painting. He receives great encouragement from his wife Jacqueline, who strongly supports his decision to be a full-time painter and to retain his independence. As a director of the National Indian Art Council, he attended meetings across the country, but he recently resigned his directorship, disappointed with the Council's lack of initiative and creativity. In October 1977 he went to Linköping, Sweden, for his first one-man show abroad, which aroused great interest. Eight of the canvases in the present exhibition (perhaps his best and surest works to date) were painted in Sweden amid the stimulation of a new audience and the excitement of a different light under the Swedish sky. Janvier speaks often about the different quality of light to be found in Edmonton, as compared with that in Toronto or in Sweden, and about how this affects his paintings. His work is at present touring Brazil with a travelling show organized by the Canada Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, called "Links to a Tradition". In 1975 his work was represented in the Alberta Art Founda-



5. High Hopes of a Liberal

tion's travelling exhibition that circulated in England, Belgium, and France.

Since painting the mural commissioned for the Indian Pavilion at Expo 67, Janvier has painted several other murals for schools and public buildings in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories. His mural in the County of Strathcona Building in Edmonton is the subject of an article in *ArtsCanada's* issue of February-March 1978, and is a good example of his strong style and imaginative use of a large and complex space. Other murals are adapted to different materials and themes. After the exhibition of his work at the Jacox Gallery in Edmonton in 1964, Janvier's growing recognition brought further one-man shows, including those at the Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, 1966; the MacIntosh gallery, London, Ontario, 1970; the Edmonton Art Gallery and the Pollock Gallery, Toronto, 1973; and the Gallery Moos, Toronto, 1977. The major exhibitions and public collections containing Janvier's work are listed at the back of this catalogue.

For many years Janvier used his Band Treaty Number 287 and his name to sign his paintings. In the 1960s he sometimes used the number alone. The use of the treaty number mocked a system in which people were ciphers manipulated by a distant bureaucracy, and reflected his deep concern with the depersonalized, paternalistic attitude displayed by Government toward his people. His most recent work done in Sweden omits the treaty number, an indication, perhaps, of a new confidence and maturity that can be seen in these paintings. Janvier has long used strong, colourful titles, such as "Mass Hate", "No One Cares", "Let Red Tape Do It", and "High Hopes of a Liberal". The last-named work (plate 5), shown in the present exhibition, brought Janvier briefly into mild conflict with the Department of External Affairs, as the work was to be exhibited abroad. The title, however, was not meant to have any political connotation; it referred simply to a friend of Janvier's, a liberated lady who was working out her various lifestyles. The painting has an awkward, playful, model-airplane feel-

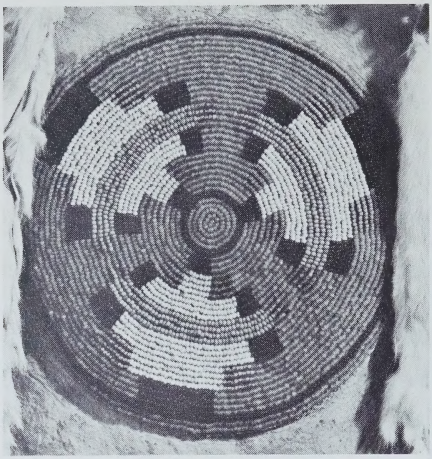
6. San'kiye Nos'alazzy

ing, related to, yet different from, the other canvases.

The Janvier style of painting is hard to classify. It has evolved over twenty years of careful development. Two early watercolour examples of his work from the National Museum of Man, Ottawa, done in 1962 (one shown in plate 1), reveal the continuity of design over the past fifteen years. Janvier considers himself to be an artist who happens to be Indian, rather than a Native artist in the contemporary sense of subject or style. As one studies his painting and talks to him, however, the Indian feeling and symbolism in his art become more apparent. Janvier is in many ways a very modern artist, well versed in Western European art traditions, and he has had wider training, experience, and exposure than most Native artists. His style is an amalgam of many influences merged to create a fresh and distinctive individual message; he describes it as an off-shoot of abstract expressionism "highly personalized", with influences from Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. The "whiplash" line of the later Kandinsky, poised or darting like a sperm or flagella across the tension of white canvas and the boundaries of the frame, has echoes in Janvier. Janvier's canvases like Kandinsky's are often full of energy with their cell-like forms, a kind of shorthand for life, a combination of geometric and biological design, often reminiscent of microphotographs of stained tissue specimens.

Some of Janvier's work from the early 1960s, at present in the National Museum of Man, Ottawa, is similar to Alfred Pellan's; other work from the period 1966-67 in the collection of the Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, is more complex and busy, testing designs and colours. Since then, the technique has become gradually more controlled and disciplined, the line and draughtsmanship finer, the colours more considered and balanced. Janvier has used many media, but increasingly he works in acrylic and gouache. Most of the works reproduced in this catalogue and in the present show are acrylic on canvas.

Exhibit Design Services



7. Beaded rosette on Blackfoot shirt

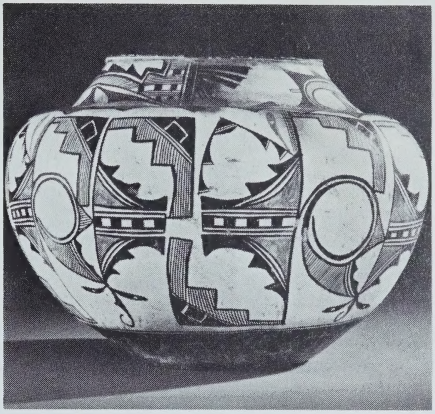
8. Cree quilled pouch

Robert Houle, in his essay "Alex Janvier; a new dialogue between Native Sensibility and Western Tradition", written for The National Museum of Man, Ottawa, views Janvier as a synthesis or bridge between Indian and Western (European) cultural feeling. Janvier's work is in sharp contrast to that of Norval Morriseau, who portrays Ojibway legends using the ancient "formlines" of the rock artists, and that of the Cree artist, Allen Sapp, who is essentially Western European in everthing except his subjects. Houle writes that Janvier's work "demands the same maturity and sophistication (of the viewer) required by any modern painter". Janvier himself feels that his paintings illustrate a communications gap between Indian and white experience. He says his paintings "are generators of interest in each person", each seeing what he wishes to see and finding his own meaning. He says his work often disturbs people. Probably art that lasts frequently disturbs.

With all its individuality, the strength of Janvier's art gives it a universal appeal. The Indian symbolism or shorthand appears more distinctive in each viewing, and the impression is cumulative as one studies the paintings as a group. They may resemble a road map or an aerial view of rivers flowing through the tundra or animal tracks in the snow, the lines converging and diverging, with here centres of action, there tumult and happenings, stopping suddenly in suspense, or curving on forever off the canvas. There is a sense of viewing fleetingly a series of frames from some cosmic film, or dyes floating on a moving river, and at their best the pictures convey a vast sense of rhythm beyond the canvas, of perceiving an instant in space.

Janvier is sometimes described as "Western Canadian" in feeling, his dramatic use of white space on canvas evoking the immensity of sky, land, and water. Since 1973 his line has become more refined and elegant, and the sophisticated balance and complexity of the largely unpainted canvas is most evident in the works done at Linköping, Sweden, in the fall of 1977. Sometimes his work becomes more representational, with the inclusion of faces, figures, and animals, as in the painting "Dene Nennay" done in 1977, but the realistic figures and representations tend to weaken the individuality of his work and to make it somehow more commercial, less profound.

9. Haida chest



10. Zuni pot

Jacqueline Fry (1972), analyzing Janvier's rosettes, triangles, squares, and circles, sees not only heraldic forms, but significant Indian signs and imagery. Plains Indian symbols related to abstract Plains quill or bead work from tribes such as the Blackfoot or Sioux add meaning to paintings such as "San'kiye Nos' alazzy" (plate 6), where rosette-like forms resemble beadwork on the Blackfoot shirt from the ROM collection (plate 7). Janvier's circles and dots may complete a curve, or define or accent white space, and he believes that the curves in his paintings may be derived from early Athapaskan, and particularly Cree, influences. The Cree are close neighbours, though not always friends, of the Chipewyans; the double curve motif is an ancient theme in Woodlands native art, and is even more evident in Malecite, Micmac, Naskapi, and some Ojibway and Iroquois work; the example shown is from a Cree quilled pouch (plate 8) from the McCord Museum, Montreal.

In several of Janvier's paintings, "Noise Language" (front cover) or "Swenglish" (plate 2), for example, Northwest Coast Indian designs are evident, particularly eyes or faces in the ovoid form found in Tlingit, Haida, and other art of the Northwest (Holm, 1965), and shown on the Haida chest from the ROM collection (plate 9). The colours and designs are often the cool reds and blues associated with Northwest Coast Indian art, as in the painting "Today Is the First Day" with its killer whale leaping through space (plate 3).

Other canvases show the warm yellows, reds, and browns of the Southwest, and their design may resemble Pueblo pottery of that region — Zuni or Hopi pots, for example. The geometric, angular centres with scroll-like lines reaching outward are illustrated on the Zuni pot from the ROM collection, and are similar to the structure of some of Janvier's compositions, such as "The Troubled Identity" (plate 4), 1973.

Analysis of Alex Janvier's style of painting can go on endlessly. When asked what he considers to be his style, he replies with humour, "Hunter's Dream", and then on reflection, with a laugh, "More accurately, Hunter's Son Dream Style".

11. Alberta Rose

collections

Canada Council Art Bank
Alberta Art Foundation, Government of Alberta
The Toronto-Dominion Bank, Toronto
Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Calgary, Alberta
The McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario
Glenbow Institute of Art, Calgary, Alberta
National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Ontario
Poole Collection, Edmonton, Alberta
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba
The Late Lester B. Pearson Collection, Winnipeg, Manitoba
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Quebec
Department of Northern and Indian Affairs, Ottawa, Ontario

murals

1967 Indian Pavilion, Montreal EXPO '67
1971 Ermineskin Kindergarten, Hobbema, Alberta
1972 Sherwood Medical Clinic Building, Sherwood Park, Alberta
1973 Sawridge Motor Hotel, Slave Lake, Alberta
1973 Explorer Hotel, Yellowknife, N.W.T.
1974 Onion Lake Elementary School, Onion Lake, Saskatchewan
1975 County of Strathcona Building, Sherwood Park, Alberta
1975 Muttart Conservatory, Edmonton, Alberta

group exhibitions

1964 Spring All-Alberta Show, Edmonton, Alberta
1965 Jacox Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1972 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba
1972 Framecraft Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1973 Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1974 Uni-Art, Edmonton, Alberta
1974 Gallery Anthropos, London, England
1974 "Indian Art '74", Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario
1974 Glenbow Institute of Art, Calgary, Alberta
1974 National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Ontario
1974 American Indian Art, Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
1974 Inukshuk Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario
1974 "Prairie '74", Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1975 Alberta Art Foundation international travelling show to England, Brussels, and Paris
1975 Pollock Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1975 Dominion Gallery, Montreal, Quebec
1975 Wallack Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario
1975 Art Emporium, Vancouver, British Columbia
1975 Brock Gallery, Penticton, British Columbia

one-man exhibitions

1964 Jacox Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1966 Cultural Activities, Department of Indian Affairs & Northern Development Ottawa, Ontario
1970 MacIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario
1973 Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1973 Downstairs Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1973 Pollock Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1974 Canue, Edmonton, Alberta
1974 Framecraft Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
1975 Calgary Galleries, Calgary, Alberta
1977 Gallery Moos, Toronto, Ontario
1977 Gallery Stenhusgarden, Linköping, Sweden

Exhibit Design Services

exhibition list
ROM, january-february, 1978

Blondes and Blue Jeans 1977
70 x 75 cm acrylic on canvas

Saddle Sore Trip 1977
56 x 70 cm acrylic on canvas

Swedish Evening 1977
94 x 110 cm acrylic on canvas

Sauna Baby 1977
85 x 110 cm acrylic on canvas

Swenglish 1977
80 x 94 cm acrylic on canvas

San'kiye Nos'alazzy 1974
90.5 x 121 cm acrylic on canvas

High Space 1975
95 x 127 cm acrylic on canvas

Alberta Rose 1977
90 x 60 cm acrylic on canvas

Some Sky 1977
110 x 85 cm acrylic on canvas

Noise Language 1977
95 x 110 cm acrylic on canvas

Dene Nennay 1977
91 x 122 cm acrylic on canvas

High Hopes of a Liberal 1974
90.5 x 122 cm acrylic on canvas

Today is the First Day 1974
93.5 x 110 cm acrylic on canvas

On the Brink of Dawn 1977
52.5 x 73 cm gouache

His Name White Collar 1975
109 x 81.5 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Miss Helen Band

The Word Given 1975
91.5 x 122 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Miss Helen Band

Pathway of Man 1977
119.5 x 86.5 acrylic on canvas
courtesy Miss Helen Band

The Troubled Identity 1973
44.5 x 65 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Optimus Family Trust

Edjere Janny 1975
45 x 60 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Dr. B. Cinader

There is Always Room at the Bottom 1976
61 x 51 cm gouache
courtesy Gallery Moos

Accept This, The Birds 1976
107 x 81.2 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Gallery Moos

Partridge Hill Road 1973
61 x 91.5 cm acrylic on canvas
courtesy Gallery Moos

Untitled 1962
30.5 x 23 cm watercolour
courtesy National Museum of Man

Untitled 1962
30.5 x 23 cm watercolour
courtesy National Museum of Man

Exhibit Design Services

bibliography

Fry, Jacqueline 1972 **Treaty Numbers 23, 287, 1171—Three Indian Painters of the Prairies**
The Winnipeg Art Gallery

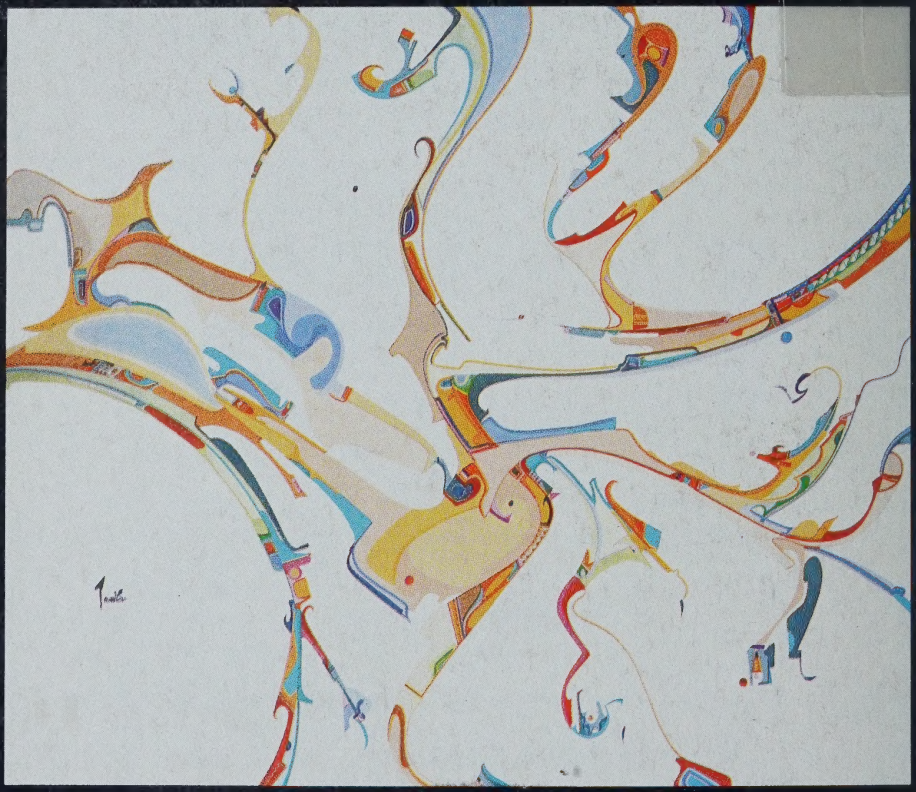
Harlow, Francis H. 1970 **Historic Pueblo Indian Pottery**
Museum of New Mexico Press

Holm, Bill 1965 **Northwest Coast Indian Art: an Analysis of Form**
University of Washington Press

Houle, Robert 1977 **Alex Janvier; a new dialogue between Native Sensibility and Western Tradition** National Museum of Man, Ottawa

Light and Space in the Suburban Landscape
ArtsCanada, February-March 1978 Toronto, Ontario (re the Strathcona Library Mural)

Overy, Paul 1969 **Kandinsky — the Language of the Eye**
Elek Books Ltd., London

Payne, Anne 1976 **Janvier**
Arts West, March-April 1976, Calgary, Alberta

Vermeulen, Inge 1977 **Alex Janvier**
Heritage, September-October 1977, Edmonton, Alberta